

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 LAGOS 000322

SIPDIS

LONDON FOR GURNEY
PARIS FOR NEARY
CAIRO FOR MAXSTADT

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/13/2008
TAGS: [PREL](#) [KISL](#) [PINR](#) [PTER](#) [NI](#)
SUBJECT: NIGERIA: AN ASSESSMENT OF POLITICIZED ISLAM IN THE SOUTH

Classified By: CONSUL GENERAL ROBYN HINSON-JONES FOR REASONS 1.5 (B) AN

D (D).

[11.](#) (C) Summary. Islam as a factor in politics in southwestern Nigeria and the threat of the imposition of Shari'a (Koranic law) in the south are not current or near-term possibilities. However, all observers agree that overwhelming poverty, and uncertainty and possible instability in government in Nigeria are factors that could lead to some future politicization of Islam in the region.
End summary.

Background

[12.](#) (U) Northern Nigeria has had a significant Muslim population (Hausa and Fulani ethnic groups) since the eleventh century, and is today over 90 percent Muslim. Only as recently as the nineteenth century has Islam spread significantly in the south. Southern Muslims (mainly in the Yoruba southwest) have lived peacefully with their Christian and animist countrymen for decades. However, according to researchers on the issue of the rise of political or fundamentalist Islam, conditions in all of Nigeria over the past decade have become ideal for the development of politicized Islam. They point to the facts that Nigeria is the most populous country on the continent, Muslims probably make up over half its population, there is wide-spread poverty, political instability, a weak and ineffective police force and prodigious official corruption all of which have, in other majority Muslim countries, led to the rise of dissident Islamists. Some Muslims have addressed social grievances through religious expression in fundamentalist appeals to piety or challenges to the political status quo. It should be noted here that Usama bin Laden's original protest was against what he believed to be the corrupt, greedy, and ineffective ruling al Saud family who claimed to be the protectors of the holiest places in Islam, but who allowed US troops (non-Muslims) to defile Saudi soil by their very presence.

[13.](#) (U) In 1999 Nigeria transitioned from military to civilian rule and installed retired General Olusegun Obasanjo, a Christian Yoruba from the south, as President. According to southern observers, this was accomplished only because Obasanjo and his Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) agreed to support the official adoption of Shari'a law in several northern states. (Comment. Several of our southern interlocutors, Christian and Muslim and from several political parties, say that adoption of Shari'a led to an increase in ethnic/religious conflict and confrontations between Muslims and Christians in the north over the past four years. The Muslim majority in the north scored a political point with Shari'a,

and they press that point home at every opportunity. End comment.) The events of September 11, 2001, further heightened Nigeria's visibility, along with other west African countries, as a majority Muslim country and a possible breeding ground for Islamist fundamentalist terrorism.

14. (U) Questions of regional stability prompted investigation of whether Islam is on the rise and becoming more political in the country. When a Muslim woman (Amina Lawal) from the North was sentenced to death by stoning, several contestants in the Miss World Pageant that was to be held in Nigeria in November, 2002, protested by refusing to come to Nigeria. Shortly after the remaining contestants arrived, an article in a national newspaper that allegedly "insulted" the prophet Mohammed set off Muslim riots that left 200 dead. These events and the continuing ethnic/political conflicts in the North also raise unease about the possible upsurge in political Islam in the South.

State of Islam in the South

15. (C) PolOff met with the Secretary General of the Lagos-based Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, Dr. Lateef Adegbite. Adegbite said that there is no conflict between Muslims in the south and other religions here. Although he could not give even a rough estimate of the current number of Muslims in the south, he said that Islam is growing steadily in the region and the concern of the Muslim community is to fund and build enough schools (madrassas) for increasing numbers of Muslim children. According to Adegbite, there is no pressure to adopt Shari'a in the south, and the uproar over the Lawal case will be resolved peacefully by the courts. Adegbite's views on other possible areas of religious friction are conservative and track the views of other Muslim sources. He told us that many Muslims, in Nigeria and worldwide, were convinced the War on Terrorism is a war against Muslims, and he added the familiar charge that the US has a "double standard" when dealing with the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. Nigeria's Supreme Council has no authority to appoint or remove Muslim clergy, nor to review or standardize the Friday mosque sermons, unlike many other majority Muslim countries. As a consequence, Adegbite said he has no way to determine if an individual mosque, or southern mosques in general, are becoming politicized, but he doubts this could be the case.

16. (C) PolSpecs from Abuja and Lagos spent several days in January interviewing key members of the Muslim communities in Lagos, Ibadan and other towns in the southwest about their views on the status of Islam in the region. (Comment. All observers agree that Muslims do not make up a significant percentage of the population in the southeast or south-central regions. Thus, the PolSpecs concentrated their efforts in the southwest. End comment.) After a number of interviews, they reached the general conclusion that religion is not a major factor in the political calculations of residents and politicians in the southwest. However, they reported that many of their interlocutors were also quick to point out that Islam is growing in the region, Muslims are being more assertive and, thus, religion could at some point in the future become a political issue. Some Muslims reported seeing signs now, such as growing religious intolerance and exclusion based on religion, that

may be the precursors of future religious strife and disruptions of government.

A scholar's view

17. (C) In Ibadan, PolSpecs met with Ahmeed Agberemi, a highly respected Islamic scholar. Agberemi told them that Muslims object to the use of the word "fundamentalist" when discussing Islam, and disagree with most Westerners' definition of the term. "What we should be concerned about," he declared, "is rising 'essentialism' in all the major religions." He explained that essentialism, often mistaken for fundamentalism, has an overarching presence within and across national boundaries, and has the potential to influence socio-political outcomes, not only in Nigeria, but globally as well. Agberemi said he does not believe that fundamentalism is, as yet, a problem in the southwest, nor does he think that the region's politics are currently influenced in any way by religion. "Unlike in the north," he said, "where there are extreme forms of Islam, the 50-50 Christian to Muslim demographic split in most southwestern States precludes the possibility of the ascendancy to power by Islamists of whatever persuasion." On the subject of Shari'a, Agberemi said the likelihood of southwestern States' enacting Shari'a law was extremely remote. He was more concerned, however, with what he said is a growing use of inciting rhetoric in speeches by Muslim leaders and in the mosques sermons. He concluded, saying that the recent debates and discussions in Nigeria about identity, ethnicity and the role of religion in government, are "notions that merely inhibit pluralities of ideas while justifying exclusion, hatred and violence."

A Muslim woman's view

18. (C) PolSpecs also met with Abiola Akiyode-Afolabi, Executive Director of the Lagos-based Center for Women Advocates, Research and Documentation. Akiyode-Afolabi is also a noted supporter of and campaigner for Muslim women's rights. Although she generally agreed with the thoughts of Agberemi, she warned that a failing economy and massive poverty could drive Nigerians "to the point where they seek social justice through politicized religion." She said some Muslim politicians in the past had tried to get co-religionists' votes by passing out food and money. She predicted that this might again be the situation in the upcoming elections because of the alarming rate of poverty. As to real politicized Islam, that is, Muslims voting for Muslims only because of their religion, or Muslims voting for Muslims in the hope of influencing government with Islamic tenets, Akiyode-Afolabi said she had not seen this in the southwest--yet.

A politician's view

19. (C) In a private conversation with Ambassador and CG (septel), Lagos State Governor Bola Tinubu, himself a Muslim, concurred that Islam is not politicized in the south. Tinubu opined that in the southeast and southwest, religion is less important to voters than a candidate's political record or personality.

110. (C) Comment. Based on our interviews and the opinions of political

observers in the southwest, we conclude that Islam and the possibility of Shari'a law are not political concerns for the near-term in southwestern Nigeria. Islam in the southwest is relatively new, compared to that in the north, and may be too young to flex its muscles here. Even growing Muslim activities in the region, especially the sudden emergence and fast growth of "Nasfat" groups (Muslim youth organizations) in Lagos and other parts of the southwest, do not appear to be an indication of the politicization of Islam; instead these activities are an effort by Muslim elite to turn Muslim youth from the seduction of a robust Pentecostal movement by making Muslim ritual more "Christian-like." For the long-term, however, all of our sources agree that if socio-economic conditions do not improve, there is a reasonable possibility of a future politicization of Islam in both northern and southern Nigeria.

HINSON-JONES
HINSON-JONES